

## A PHILOSOPHICAL COMMENTARY ON THE CANADIANIZATION OF POLITICAL EDUCATION

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At present, all appears calm, quiet, ordered at most universities in Canada, the United States and in most western European countries. The era of student protest, activism and so-called radicalism seems to have vanished like the flowers of past flower children. The dominant conception of the university today is that of an institution specifically and functionally designed to transmit and produce knowledge, a place where the better informed transmit vital, functional information to the lesser informed. The university is now a technological factory where the finished products are skilled technicians who maintain and develop further the prevailing technologies of society. Today, students are willing to accept this conception of the university partly because we apparently live in a 'no-growth' situation, a 'conservative' society, in a condition of limited access to resources. In order to prosper, one must be familiar with the technologies of the age; in order to succeed, one must develop the skills of 'survival', 'competence' and 'productivity'; the qualities of 'competitiveness', 'success' and 'efficiency.'

What was student protest about? Where have we come from and where do we stand today in terms of education? Does the term education itself have meaning in a situation where society is comprehended as a set of interdependent technological systems?

Education is the process operative in each society whereby one generation is initiated into the civilization of the previous generation. The purpose of education is to practice conversation, to speak a language of a civilization, to develop the quality and character of judgment. A society without a civilized heritage, without a quality of conversation, cannot maintain the character of education.

Today, we have confused education with socialization. Socialization is the collective social process of training a younger generation in the habits, rituals, beliefs and practices of a previous generation. It is acritical, oriented towards extending and defending previous patterns of training — and control — against critical judgment and novelty. It is the process of maintaining habit in the face of change, the manner in which a society extends itself from one generation to the next without

incurring the possibility of breakdown; it is the mechanism of imposing an existing conception of value, or good, upon the next generation. In order to do so, training is vital. Training is the process of acquiring skills and competence in the prevailing social technologies, whether they be the skill of parentage, management skills or even the skills of speech and thought. Training in this sense is similar to bionomics, that is the branch of biology concerned with organisms in their relations to the prevailing environment. The emphasis is upon adjustment, adaptation to a given set of conditions, now known as 'quality control', whereby the organism is adequately equipped to sustain itself in a given environmental situation.

The society we know is increasingly environmentally oriented. It places great emphasis upon the ability of people to adjust, to accommodate themselves to the environment and, also, to adjust the environment to the organism. Adjustment, is therefore a dual process. Training ensures success, that is the ability of the person, or the organism to live in relative equanimity within the context of a given situation. It involves the capacity of the person to acquire skills, through training in information and manipulation so that he/she can succeed in maintaining their existing character within the environmental context. Our society prizes and exalts this bionomic person! Our present educational system in this bionomic situation is, therefore, oriented to this training process.

Our present education system moreover is an extension of the corporate-dominated environment in which we live. We can witness the duplication of the governing structure of large corporations in our universities. The pretense at democracy exists, but persons are ascribed membership in some functionally determined corpus (workers = students, management = lecturers, executives = high-level administrators) and decisions are taken through a process of ritualized, hidden bargaining between these various bodies. The classical liberal-democratic conception of decision-making involving public debate, responsible decision-making, accountability and individual choice is absent. Further, the language of consumerism has overpowered the educational system. At universities, we now hear the language of 'productivity', 'cost-benefit' and 'quality control'. Alas, the instrumental language of vulgar consumerism and the deathly language of technological efficiency has permeated the discourse carried on in the universities.

What has resulted from this system? First, technologically advanced societies have succeeded in destroying the possibility and reality of the sense of responsibility. Tradition, which previously defined the con-

## POLITICAL EDUCATION

tours of responsibility, has collapsed. The classic notion of "struggle" both for survival and for personal efficaciousness has been emptied of content. The locus of responsibility previously fixed in family kinship and interpersonal relations has been dissolved. The irresponsibility of childhood where everything is "taken" and life is experienced as a "game" now extends into adult life. Life has no orthodox purpose and individuals no longer mature into responsibility. Consumerism or "taking" and the psychological predisposition to playing "games" has become the predisposition of most people. The present educational system socializes one into this environment. We learn the skills of choice between commodities, and cleverness is distinguished by the ability to make good deals; we acquire the skills of playing the "game", learning the rules and how to manipulate them in order to succeed.

How to be responsible? How does one experience today the sense and the agony of responsibility in life? The experience of life with the possibility of the feelings of intimacy, love, friendship, of tradition, of conversation, of discourse, of pain, exaltation, joy, grief has been submerged in the all pervasive character of instrumentality. Today we experience life either as an instrument or as a victim. We all worship the idolatry of utility, and utility corrupted becomes the vehicle for control. If we are trained to 'use' or to be 'used' we exhaust the human experience of responsibility. We no longer consider acts as expressions of human worth and character but we search for the explanations and the excuses of acts; we have sociologized action! People now no longer feel, sense, acknowledge themselves. Individuality, the springboard for thought, has been emptied, submerged in instrumentality. The 'system' has launched individuality into the gutter of history. Responsibility — the basis of conversation, of discourse, of experience — has been dissolved.

The relevance of history, of our own individual past, of culture, and ethnic identities, the relevance of will, purpose, revolt and meaningful individuality seem to be rendered minimal in our present instrumental age. Further, we assure that this instrumentality is a force devoid of specific context, it is an aspect of our age, a consequence of a Hegelianized notion of history where human action is either an accident, or the unwitting servant of some abstracted forces of history. The normal and mundane processes of life and of experience are therefore robbed of their specificity and particularity.

The irresponsibility of human action has led to the end of the possibility of tragedy. We can observe the pervasiveness of the in-

## HOWARD ASTER

strumental in our arts. We relate, in our arts to terror, violence, obscenity in terms of irresponsible instrumentality. We all relate to the symbols and operations of a tyranical or benevolent technology. Our cultural fantasies reflect the terror and the possibility of machines gone astray, of the loss of control, of the 'game' out of hand. Though we sense the irresponsibility of life, we release our fears in the cinema or the television, we exercise there our doubts and feelings of impotence and we empty our minds and our souls of the experience of responsibility and the seeds of revolt. Devoid of responsibility, of the human capacity for action, we have lost the sense of the tragic. Impotence does not lend to tragedy, it leads to the pathetic.

The third quality resulting from our instrumental age is the loss of the personal. This is indeed a paradox. Today, we absorb information on a global level. Our age is super-saturated with information but is devoid of specificity, of the texture of the concrete, of the experiential in any direct sense. For example, Japanese technology or whatever, becomes part of our own information storehouse and we consume Taiwanese hardware without any racial prejudice. The German Volkswagen and the Swedish Volvo are as much a part of our sensory experience and our suburban character as the American Cadillac. A South African heart transplant, pollution in South America, a bomb in the pacific, the earthquakes in China — through the media, they all become part of our global consciousness and our global information network. Our power, however, has in no way increased with this increase in information. Mentally, the world is now our evocator. Consciousness has exploded; power to effect change, the sense of potency, has decreased. We are all now more alienated from the world. This global consciousness breaks down national and regional standards but it also makes us more alone. We use various rituals to create temporary cohesion and community. We borrow the clothes of the Iroquois, the slang of Harlem, the ethics of our film heroes, the mores of some social clique — and our identity becomes more and more diffuse. We become anxiety-ridden! Our consciousness has expanded, but we cannot synthesize, rationalize, or organize the content of our minds or our experience. We suffer the after effects of an information explosion — shock, resignation, confusion. Action devoid of information is meaningless; however, information devoid of action is nonsense. We are receptacles of information, but have become paralyzed. The fragments of the world are within us, but we cannot act. There is no sensible context for personal action, for personal efficacy, for a sense of personal proportion and dimension, for judgment. We either become meglo-

## POLITICAL EDUCATION

maniacs, dressed in the latest fashions, hidden behind the veneer of executive power, or else we become whimpering idiots caught in the distorted web of our own expanded consciousness.

### Education Reconstituted

To reconstitute education we must have a firm grasp and recognition of our present condition — the loss of the sense of responsibility, the incapacity of the tragic experience and the decadence of the personal. We must also recognize that socialization and training, while necessary processes for organisms and most rudimentary life, are inadequate for the continuation of the human experience. We are not then organisms; we bear the burden and the joy of civilization! The reconstitution of education must, therefore, begin with the unravelling of the burden of our civilization.

“A civilization may be regarded as a conversation being carried on between a variety of human activities, each speaking with a voice, or in a language of its own . . .”<sup>1</sup> It presupposes both the centrality of human activity and the specificity of voice and language. The cumulative character of various human activities, specific and particular as they may be, is a conversation, a form of human interchange based upon mutuality, respect and recognition. Conversation is the reflection, the crystallization, the articulate characterization of the varied human activities engaged in by persons in societies. It is the art of giving shape, dimension, and quality; of providing the voice for that which persons ‘do’ when they act. Activity without the parallel quality of conversation is merely a mime, a set of soundless movements. It is only when activity seeks its voice through conversation that we can acknowledge and recognize the human element in activity.

Conversation, therefore, provides the mesh and the web of meaning which surrounds us all in the normal context of life and living. It provides the character of place, time, specification and extension from which we recognize the world around us. Conversation is the extension of man from the ‘ego’ to the ‘other’, the link between the specific ‘self’ and the general ‘them’, the connection between what one senses or feels in an immediate manner and the vast heritage which surrounds us.

A civilization may thus be regarded as the continuous art of conversation whereby the varied, specific, particular human activities, or the deeds and actions of persons, are woven together into some reflexive whole which has shape, character, and form. Conversation is an art like that of the weaver, who takes fibres of specific length, colour and tex-

## HOWARD ASTER

ture and blends them so that form becomes apparent, rather than immanent. Every civilization requires this sense of conversation, so that human activity in its specific, particularistic character becomes comprehensible as part of a wider, woven tapestry of human endeavour. A civilization devoid of this art of conversation, with merely a set of specific, particularistic human activities, is a civilization without a voice, a chaotic scramble of disconnected 'doers' and 'doings'.

Education is the process of learning the character of a civilization, of being initiated into the activities of a society and their reflections in conversation. It means appreciating the character of 'doing' and 'doers' and, as well, it means cultivating the capacity to weave together these various 'doings' and 'doers' into a coherent form. This can only be achieved through conversation and judgment, the art and practice of which constitutes the basis of education. In this process of learning both activity and conversation, we not only make something of ourselves, but we also add to the civilization in which we participate. Education is, hence, a process of direct participation through activity and conversation in a web of human endeavour. It is both particular, specific activity as well as the practice of conversation and judgment.

It should be clear now how socialization differs from education. The former involves the bionomic practice of information and technique, the introduction of persons merely into the activities and technologies of an ongoing social matrix composed of organisms and their environment. The latter involves the human art and practice of conversation and judgment. The former is repetitive and extensive; the latter is creative and participatory. The former is mechanistic and directed; the latter is precarious and indeterminate.

I have argued that the results of socialization and training have led to the loss of the sense of responsibility, the demise of the tragic and the decadence of the personal. The genuine process of education must restore the sense of responsibility, the possibility for the experience of tragedy and the joy and anguish of the personal to human experience. This can only be done if we recognize the weight and the demands of our civilization as it impinges upon us all.

Today, in Canada, we are faced with a dual task — the genuine reconstitution of our educational system and the explanation of the character of our own civilization. These two tasks are, obviously, interrelated, one entailing the other. The issue of 'Canadianization' is a vital one if, and only if, we understand 'Canadianization' as posing to us the challenge of reflecting upon and engaging in the conversation concerning our civilization. In many ways, the question of exploring the

## POLITICAL EDUCATION

voices and the languages of our civilization may lead us to the resigned recognition that there is no authentic character to our conversation; that the specific, particularistic human activities — the noises of the 'doers' and the 'doings' — that have resulted from the instrumentality of our age have stifled the art of conversation forever. Or, we may discover that we do not have a civilized heritage in Canada; that we lack an authentic quality of conversation; that our language and our voices are merely parrot calls, sad imitations of British and American forms of conversation. I, personally, do not think this is the case!

To reconstitute our educational system is to explore the character of our civilization, the immediate form of which we experience as Canadians. This is the genuine and pressing issue. It means going beyond the specific and particularistic explanation of those human activities, the 'doings' and the 'doers' located in the geographic area called Canada. Human activity is only one dimension of civilization. It provides the experiential basis out of which conversation emanates. To Canadianize education, we must civilize our own understanding. We must be bold enough to ask ourselves what is the character of our civilization? What are its voices and languages? What is the quality of our conversation? What is the texture and depth of our civilized heritage?

If we pose the problem of Canadianization in these terms we will avoid the shrieks of those shallow Canadianizers who seem to dominate our debate today. We will recognize that conversation, not polemics constitutes the basis for education. We must realize that our civilization does have character and depth, authenticity and texture. It is only through the reconstitution of education as the conversation of our civilization that we can avoid the impaling of our minds and spirits on parochialisms. The conversation of our civilization extends us beyond particularistic human activities and puts us in touch with the art of the weaver, the tapestry of civilized human endeavour. We all participate in the extension of this tapestry; we are all responsible for its quality and its continuity.

The challenge to Canadianize our education demands that we recognize, explore and appreciate the immediate, specific and particularistic character of human activities as they are located and experienced in the Canadian setting. Canadian activities demand, indeed, they crave for specification, identification, exploration, attention. We must be willing to focus our attention on the contextual character of these human activities. But we must do more! We must also provide the voices, the authentic language for these activities. The articulation and

HOWARD ASTER

crystallization of these activities into language is the practice of the art of conversation. It begins with the direct experiences of human activities and moves beyond to a conversation about a civilization — that larger backdrop against which human activities play out their parts. It is only in relation to that wider backdrop that we can begin to restore the quality of responsibility, tragedy and the personal to the character of human action. Without conversation about our civilization we will remain objects of instrumentalities, whimpers, devoid of responsibility, tragedy and personality.

Politics can be understood as the public conversation about human activities. Today, in the age of instrumentality, politics is understood as power. Instrumentality triumphant has resulted not only in the corruption of conversation but in the debasement of politics. To reconstitute education would imply the restoration of politics as public conversation about the various and the desirable forms of human activities as they are located in specific contexts. It would also imply the will and the capacity to act consistent with the character of that public conversation. Devoid of conversation, we now collapse into hollow rhetoric, captivated by our own words, corrupted by our own impotence, servants to the idolatry of power. The restoration of politics must begin with an appreciation of our specific human activities, progress to a conversation about our civilization and culminate in the restoration of the authenticity of human action.

The question of Canadianization is much larger than we have been willing to admit until now. Understood in its widest sense, as I have attempted to articulate it, Canadianization is the critical issue facing us. It may turn out that we lack the imagination or the will to appreciate the question. I hope not!

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*Notes*

1. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, London, 1967, p. 304.